Inquiry as a Strategy for Leading School Improvement

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Abstract: Increasingly, the viability of university programs to develop in school leaders the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to bring about reform are being questioned. This article uses case study methodology for looking at how an increasing emphasis on collaborative inquiry in one university's program influenced a school principal several years after that principal had completed his master's degree program in educational leadership. The principal explains his approach to accountability and how he engages teachers in inquiry around closing the achievement gap.

How can school principals use the high stakes accountability culture of today's schools to leverage engagement around practices in need of reform? There is no denying that in California schools today, principals feel enormous pressure from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) and the California Public Schools Accountability Act (1999) to bring about changes that will improve the outcomes for students, particularly students who are not performing well academically. The statistics of who is not achieving have changed little over the last two decades (Hoff, 2000;

Johnson & Viadero, 2000; Weissglass, 2001), but the current public outcry and political pressure to bring improvements in a relatively short time span is unprecedented. While standardized test results are more accessible, information alone is not enough to bring about change. Developing skills and strategies for exploring what those test scores mean in terms of practices that are working and not working is increasingly becoming a focus in educational administration credential and degree programs. This article explores that emphasis at one university and how candidates experience an emphasis on inquiry as a tool for leading efforts to close the achievement gap.

The University Program

At California State University, East Bay (CSUEB), the Department of Educational Leadership began, in the 1990s, to place more and more emphasis on teaching inquiry as a curricular strand that permeates both credential and master's degree programs (Szabo, Gonzales, Hoagland, Hopkins, et. al, 2002; Szabo, Hoagland, Lambert, Lopez, et. al, 2001; Szabo & Lambert, 2002; Szabo, Storms, Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2003). During the last decade, the department moved away from a traditional thesis for the master's degree to a requirement to lead a site-based, collaborative inquiry project to complete the degree. This focus on skill building and practice was in keeping with the department's emphasis on constructivist learning (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, et al 1995; Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, et. al. 2002) to develop leadership skills needed to manage change processes.

The most prolonged exposure to leading a site-based collaborative inquiry is during a one-year "research cohort" for candidates completing their master's degrees in educational leadership (Brynjulson & Storms, 2005; Lee & Storms, 2003, 1999; Lee, Storms, Camp & Bronzini, 2002; Storms & Lee, in press). This emphasis on leading an inquiry process is intended to help aspiring and early career administrations develop the technical skills needed to head school efforts to improve student achievement. In this inquiry work, candidates are coached by university faculty in how to collect and look at various perspectives (e.g., faculty, staff, parents, community, recent research, etc) about a topic. Few aspiring and early career administrators in the research cohort had engaged in systematic research; therefore, the university faculty take candidates through step-by-step processes of working with others at their schools to create questions to guide their research, and to develop data gathering techniques and tools such as surveys and protocols for interviews and observations. The candidates try out these data gathering tools at their

schools. They also explore a variety of strategies for looking at data, both quantitative and qualitative, and how to look across different types of data (e.g., test scores, demographic information, survey and interview results, and observations) to triangulate findings. Finally, university faculty guide candidates in presenting their findings and using those results to develop and to implement action plans. Throughout the process candidates are coached in collaboration and facilitation skills to help them engage a group in exploring the topic together (Storms & Lee, in press). The intent of this intense exposure to leading inquiry is multi-dimensional: first, the goal is provide on-going support as aspiring and early career administrators try out new skills including facilitation skills around difficult issues of race that often surface when working on the achievement gap; second, the hands-on practice with these skills is intended to build not only the technical know-how, but the habit of using inquiry as a leadership tool.

Methodology

This Department of Educational Leadership is working to develop methods to determine the impact of programs on the ways in which graduates lead schools. While candidates are enrolled in the master's degree program, multiple sources of data about how they engage in and reflect upon collaborative inquiry efforts are collected and analyzed as part of ongoing studies (Lee, Storms, Camp & Bronzini, 2002; Lee & Storms, 1999; Storms & Lee, in press). In addition, some graduates of that program continue in regular contact with faculty members who are able to observe both what these leaders are doing and hear these graduates reflect on their developing leadership skills. This paper uses a case study method (Yin, 1994) to: (a) describe samples of inquiries undertaken as part of the research cohort, and (b) present a reflection by a graduate about how he leads his school using tools that he learned in the credential and degree programs.

Sample Inquiries

Program Evaluation

Long before NCLB called for tutoring and support programs for students who were struggling in schools, many schools had developed and implemented after-school intervention programs. The emphasis of such programs differed from teaching reading strategies to general tutorial assistance, depending on what schools had determined as areas of need. Students targeted for such interventions varied from those identified as in

danger of failing, to students who had exhibited disruptive behaviors that interfered with their academic progress. However, few schools set in motion ongoing, or even periodic, systematic program evaluations to determine how well such interventions were working.

In one site-based inquiry project, an educational leadership master's degree candidate who was herself a classroom teacher, worked with other classroom teachers to evaluate a long-standing, after-school reading intervention the school had provided for 4th grade students who were identified by teachers as in danger of failing. Part of the effort in this inquiry involved identifying assumptions under which the teachers worked. Among the assumptions were that the students who they identified were new to the school, that identified students had little access to ongoing tutoring, and that the intervention helped students improve their scores on California's standardized tests. In the course of the inquiry, this team of teachers who were led by the aspiring administrator, looked at results from the state assessments for students they identified for the intervention and those who had received the intervention in the previous year. In the inquiry the teacher group also mapped how the intervention curriculum matched with the California Standards in English Language Arts (California, 1998). They looked into student enrollment records. Together they discovered that many of their assumptions were not valid: most of the students had been at their school since kindergarten and over 75% of the students had received previous services through a variety of intervention programs at the school. In looking at the curriculum, the teachers found that the emphasis of the intervention did not address the 4th grade standards and, perhaps not surprisingly, test scores had improved little for students who had participated in the intervention in the previous year. While the findings were not at all what the teachers had expected, the process of program evaluation provided new grist for various program improvements that were implemented in the ensuing year.

Issue Identification and Program Development

Providing a safe school environment is an expectation that parents and communities (as well as NCLB) have for schools. Many researchers believe that there is a link between feeling safe at school and being successful in school (Boulton,1999; McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Schools and districts employ various strategies for achieving safe schools including developing local programs or purchasing publisher materials to support such efforts. Inquiry can play a part in helping school leaders determine what the safety needs are at their schools and thus implement programs that target those areas.

Shooting incidents at schools in that last decade, and the reporting that some of these shooters were bullied at school, has added pressure to schools to adopt anti-bullying programs. At one school, the vice principal was growing increasingly concerned about the frequency of reports by individual students that they had been intimidated by other students; however, teachers and parents were adamant that these were isolated incidents. This school leader wondered how prevalent bullying actually was at this school. Working with various members of the staff including campus supervisors and cafeteria workers as well as teachers, this vice principal lead an effort to use recent research as well as staff experiences to develop a common understanding of bullying and what incidents of bullying looked like. Working from this shared understanding, the staff and faculty members began to collect data by observing students in classrooms and on the campus. The vice principal worked with students who had been trained as mediators in how to collect information about bullying when talking with students involved in conflicts. In addition, the school administrator analyzed referral and detention data from the previous year, categorizing the types of behaviors that were reported.

The group found that by working from the common definition of bullying, the number of bullying incidents was higher than the staff anticipated. Likewise, the student data from discipline and mediation referrals and staff observations indicated that certain types of intimidation behaviors were fairly common on campus, although under-reported by students and teachers. Armed with this information, the school set out to address the inappropriate behaviors immediately through instruction on appropriate behaviors, use of a revised, school-wide behavior code and communication with parents. The staff also began to explore various anti-bullying publisher programs, as well as programs in neighboring schools, to identify an on-going strategy for addressing bullying in the future. Through this site-based inquiry the school community learned the importance of systematically exploring issues. The early career administrator, who was coached in this inquiry effort by her university professor, learned various leadership strategies from issue identification to data collection to strategies for engaging the larger school community in reform efforts.

Strengthening Implementation

School districts across California are implementing various efforts to improve student achievement from adopting particular curricular programs (e.g., Houghton-Mifflin Reading) to changing school structures (e.g., class schedules, length of school day) to providing additional professional development for teachers (e.g., Beginning Teacher Support

and Assessment) to vary instructional strategies (e.g., differentiated instruction).

In an effort to improve lagging student achievement, one school district mandated that teachers use differentiated instruction. On the form that school administrators used when making classroom observations, there was a box to mark whether teachers were, in fact, using differentiated instruction. At one middle school, the assistant principal, a master's degree candidate at CSUEB, made it his practice to debrief his classroom observations with the teachers whom he had observed. In his conversations with teachers, many questions about the differentiated instruction box arose. Some teachers indicated that they did not know what differentiated instruction was or how to use it. The assistant principal was not comfortable evaluating teachers on something that they did not seem to understand; therefore, he set out to find teachers who might be interested in exploring not only what the term differentiated instruction meant, but also what it looked like in middle school classrooms.

Three seventh grade Language Arts teachers expressed interest in learning more about differentiated instruction. The assistant principal set up meetings and helped facilitate discussions about current understandings of differentiated instruction. As a group, they read and discussed recent research, books and curriculum guides that talked about differentiated instruction and learning styles. With guidance from the university professor in how to create data collection tools, the assistant principal coached the teachers into collecting and analyzing data about their teaching. The teachers surveyed students in their classes to find out how students thought they learned best. The teachers began to analyze their class activities. The group found that at the beginning of the year, instructional strategies were fairly similar across all three classrooms and that they tended to teach to only one or two learning styles.

The teachers decided to make concerted efforts to differentiate their teaching. They began to plan lessons together and agreed on data to collect about those lessons such as samples of student work, student grades on assignments and feedback from students about lessons. The efforts of the assistant principal sustained this ongoing inquiry. He often facilitated planning discussions, kept track of agreements and data, and arranged for substitutes to cover some classes so that teachers could observe each other teaching. Over the course of the inquiry the teachers learn a lot about differentiated instruction—what it was and how it looked in their classrooms. The teachers developed new teaching strategies and skills. They also learned the importance of the collegial group in helping them be more effective teachers. The school gained three teachers who felt more confident about a particular topic and who were willing to share and coach

other teachers in differentiated instruction. The school also gained a model for how collaborative inquiry could support instructional improvement. The assistant principal gained skill in working with teachers to change instruction based on systematic data collection and analysis.

The Habit of Leading from an Inquiry Stance

Candidates in the credential and master's degree programs in Educational Leadership at California State University, East Bay (CSUEB) report, in surveys of graduates, that the knowledge and skills they gain through the programs are useful to them as school leaders. However, some policymakers and critics of university programs may question whether university training impacts how school leaders approach their jobs. What follows is a description of how the assistant principal who worked to help teachers understand differentiated instruction uses the inquiry skills he learned in the master's degree program years later as he lead another middle school in its efforts to improve student achievement.

Leading Change Through the Examination of Data—A Case Study

As a principal of a middle school, the use of data has been an extraordinarily instrumental tool in fostering and promoting a culture committed to equitable outcomes for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender or previous academic status. Compiling, sharing and subsequently analyzing student data (e.g. student grades, standardized test scores, discipline records, student interest surveys) with teachers has helped develop a clearer picture of our students' strengths and needs. Consistently engaging teachers in examining student data has helped emphasize how vital it is for educators to individually and collaboratively examine, modify, refine, reflect and evaluate teaching practices to ensure that all of our students are learning. Further, analysis of student data has helped us identify professional development that equips and empowers teachers to effectively address the varied learning needs of our students.

Upon taking the helm at this school, I used student data to make a compelling case that not all students were engaged and supported in learning. By disaggregating student data by coursework and by ethnicity, I found substantial evidence (in students' test scores, grades and discipline records) that while the White students enrolled in GATE classes, the predominant group in that program, were excelling, many of our African American and Latino students were failing. I shared this data with teachers and with parents and collaborated with them to develop and

implement strategies and programs that would lead to equitable academic outcomes for all students. Leading those initial conversations proved to be difficult and controversial, but by the end of the year, our staff collaboratively decided to implement a research-based reading intervention program during the school day in an effort to accelerate the reading skills of our academically struggling students.

I must say that initially, teachers were very concerned about the scripted nature of the program. However, by examining the short term and long-term student data, the teachers' concerns about the program were alleviated. Throughout the year, the reading teachers used mastery and benchmark test data to monitor and adjust their ongoing efforts. Then, we used the standardized testing data from the previous year to help us evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention program. We found that our decision to implement a reading intervention program was an excellent one, as many of our students are now experiencing greater academic success, as measured by their course grades and their most recent standardized test scores. Consequently, teachers have concluded that even if there are components of the program that they do not like, it is working for many of our students who have not been successful in the past. In this case, teachers have redoubled their efforts to build greater expertise in teaching this program.

Accountability as a Support for Important Conversations

Although educators indeed feel the pressure of our state and federal accountability requirements, such as NCLB and California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR), I have found that these laws have made it easier for our faculty to engage in conversations about student achievement. These requirements clearly delineate goals and benchmarks for all students and at the same time require that we look at student data to determine our students' strengths and their areas of need. I actually feel supported by these established accountability measures because they empower me to speak boldly about the issue of equity and to make compelling arguments about what we need to do to provide equitable outcomes for all students. By using student data as the focal point of the conversations with teachers, they understand that it isn't just "the principal" suggesting we pay attention to how each student is doing; the federal and state governments expect that we will educate each student. While many teachers already knew this and were working towards that goal, data allows us to work together as a group. It gives us a common language for talking about achievement.

Accountability requirements also have made it easier to engage teachers in discussions about how to improve instruction. Teachers are

increasingly embracing the use of student data and are developing expertise in examining various kinds of achievement evidence collaboratively. Consequently, focusing on analyzing student data has elicited a greater degree of willingness on the part of teachers to attend professional development workshops, reorganize curriculum, revise lessons, implement new teaching strategies, share what they have learned with their colleagues and reflect on what is and what is not helping students succeed. I have observed that many of our teachers are increasingly engaging students in project-based learning activities that require and teach students to go beyond the identification and comprehension levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and to engage in higher order thinking skills, such as synthesizing and evaluating information. Classroom activities and assignments are developed based on the students' preferred learning styles. For some teachers it means having students do more collaborative work. In other words, our data discussions have spawned a greater understanding of why we simply cannot just keep teaching how we have been teaching if we are going to ensure that all of our students succeed to the levels that are expected.

Focusing on Teaching and Learning

Now, working with data is an increasingly regular practice at our school. Collectively, by grade level, departmentally and individually, our use of student data is focused on "what is working" and "for whom is it working." For example, in what way do African Americans, Latinos, Whites and Asian students succeed equally well? In what ways are students with higher socio-economic status outperforming other students? Where do boys succeed or girls succeed? We look at the data one way then, disaggregate it in another way, to look for patterns about groups and individual students.

We look at the data carefully so that we can get to the questions about which teaching practices and instructional strategies are working. It is no longer good enough to say I teach in a particular way because I have a sense that it works. While professional knowledge and experience are important, we want to know why something is working so that we can make it work for other students and teachers. As I have shared with my colleagues, I would not take my car to a mechanic who worked only from a gut level feeling that I needed a new engine. I would want him to perform some diagnostic tests to gather information that would determine what was wrong. I would then expect him to use his professional knowledge to fix it. We use a similar process in our school—collecting data to identify what is working and not working. Then, we focus our efforts on determining ways to address any weaknesses. In one instance,

we wanted to know if the standards-based textbook was working for students who were reading two-to-three levels below grade level. We collected data, looked at it together and concluded that these students were not successful in many ways. Since then we have instituted interventions and other instructional changes to help these students accelerate their reading skills and to prepare them for the academic rigor of high school.

We use many different types of data at our site, including STAR reporting clusters. In the California Standards Test (CST), information is disaggregated by standards with clear expectations about the number and percentage of questions students must answer correctly to be identified as proficient. At our school we look at disaggregated data by student race, gender, and classroom—both subject areas and interventions. Armed with this information, teachers can develop lessons to target areas of weakness. When students are strong in a knowledge or skill area, teachers know that and spend less time working on what students know already. Data helps teachers know better what to teach. Teachers and departments (and intervention programs) look at the disaggregated data together, collaborating about teaching strategies and lessons, and sharing lessons. Teachers are looking together at student work in order to learn more about whether or not, and to what extent, their lessons are helping students achieve. This type of reflection is vital in creating a school environment committed to providing equitable outcomes for all students.

Our analysis of student data is not only limited to identifying student weaknesses, but also student strengths and assets. This work has helped us to focus more on what students can do and helps us build a positive learning environment at our school. In order to ensure that our students are having successful learning experiences, it is vital educators value and build upon the backgrounds, skills, talents and gifts students bring to the classroom (Lee, 2004). To this end, some teachers have begun using an asset inventory with students in order to learn more about what students do well. This strategy helps our teachers develop nurturing relationships with our students. Focusing on a student's strengths enables teachers to make the necessary connections between the state standards and what a student knows, brings, cares about or can do (Williams, 2003).

Identifying and valuing a student's assets is especially helpful in engaging parents in our efforts to improve student achievement. In my experience as an administrator, I have seen that too often disagreements between teachers and parents occur when teachers talk only about what students cannot do well. Parents do not want to only look at what their children cannot do. Further, a school cannot develop a successful partnership with parents by focusing on the negative. Looking at assets

and making that a part of the discussion means that teachers and parents can work together building on a child's strengths rather than maintaining a frustrating, contentious, unproductive relationship focused on what a student cannot do. Parents send us their most valuable possessions; schools are obligated to acknowledge and celebrate the abilities and talents students have, to develop strategies for polishing every diamond in the rough, and to build successful, positive relationships with our families. Data that focuses on a student's strengths is a way to accomplish these objectives.

The Principal's Role

What roles do I as a school leader play in this work of using data to promote equity? I model ways of looking at data including how and why we disaggregate data. The majority of my conversations with teachers and parents start with data. It is my intent to provide these key stakeholders constant exposure to data and to guide them towards using this information to make informed decisions regarding ways to increase student achievement. I lead professional development sessions where I show teachers how to look at data—how to read it and how to make use of it.

I encourage teacher collaboration and set out ways to support those collegial conversations by setting aside collaboration time and supporting groups of teachers in pursuing additional training together. I direct teacher conversations in the weekly collaboration time by giving data-oriented assignments that teachers work on together. I monitor the conversations by reviewing minutes of their collaboration sessions; minutes that serve not only this monitoring function, but also to help teachers track their findings for future reference.

In addition, I use data to talk with teachers about their teaching. When I observe in classrooms I not only note what teachers are teaching, but also I collect information such as the percentage of students actively involved in a lesson and any patterns (e.g., gender or race) about who was participating or engaged. When teachers bring data to me, I sit when them and we look at it together. They sometimes ask me how to read data and I work to instruct them.

Challenges for School Leaders

This process of using data as a basis for conversations and planning has been a slow process. To be sure, we are moving forward as a school; however, not everyone has embraced our efforts. Data can be intimidating and it is a leadership challenge to reduce the fear of using data. Additionally, some teachers seem to be afraid that data exposes what they are not doing well—that they do not demonstrate proficiency in all of the

strands of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession. Still others are unwilling to admit that they play a role in the perpetuation of the legacy of institutionalized racism. It is easier to engage in conversations, and to empower teachers to teach in today's classrooms if they are willing to explore new ideas rather than stay entrenched in a particular strategy or a particular way of thinking.

Building a school that can have these conversations about data means that leaders need to encourage discussion. We have more collaboration now than we did in the past. Now teachers are conversing about student achievement and lesson plans. Recently a teacher shared his excitement about a meeting between the 8th grade History teachers where they collaboratively developed standards-based lessons and a pacing guide related to a unit on the Civil War. He was excited because he and his colleagues successfully aligned their lessons with the key standards tested on the California Standards Test in History. Collaborating with his colleagues, aligning instruction to the state standards, and developing lessons based on student needs and student strengths was extremely useful to him. I praised their efforts and offered to visit their classrooms and provide feedback from my observations. As a result of discussions about student achievement in science, teachers within the department decided to use more handouts with graphic organizers and illustrations to reach more students. Again, I applauded the modifications the science teachers made to their lesson planning and I have observed that the percentages of students that are on-task during their classroom activities have increased. I am encouraged that more teachers are talking to each other and asking questions about teaching. An important role for me as is leader is to keep all of this work focused on asking tougher questions that will lead us to be become a more inclusive school for all students.

As a principal, every time I use data to point out inequity it sets up walls. However, NCLB gives me the platform to have the conversations about equity that we did not have before. Now we have a reason to discuss the disparity in the performance of students from various ethnic groups. Prior to NCLB, some teachers were reticent to listen or participate in these discussions, but most are more willing to do so now. With Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) there is an expectation that a stated percentage of students in a group such as African American or Latino students will perform at a particular achievement level. When we see that our students are not meeting these goals, then the conversations about improving performance for students can really begin. I am no longer the "African American principal" playing the race card; I am the principal helping teachers grapple with improving teaching and learning for all students. I hear complaints about NCLB, but this is the first time in my career as

an educator when issues of performance by race and socioeconomic level out being talked about with a focus on how to help each student succeed.

What I Use from My University Experience

My administrative credential and master's degree experiences at CSUEB legitimized using data to improve the schools in which I work. The experience of leading a collaborative inquiry crystallized in me a sense of how to use evidence and taught me strategies to collect and look at data. It also taught me different ways to present data. Leading that inquiry helped me understand how to engage teachers in collaborative conversations. My university training has under girded and empowered me, as well as fostered a great deal of courage. My experiences in the Educational Leadership program made me realize I was not the only person in schools concerned with or dealing with equity issues. There were many early career and aspiring administrators who desired to make a difference for underperforming students. While the program helped me build my courage, I also learned how to lead in an analytical, methodical way that would engage teachers so that they could make a difference with their students. My experiences in the Educational Leadership program, and particularly the research cohort at CSUEB, helped me understand that it did not need to be just me taking on these hard issues. I learned that it is an essential leadership skill to teach teachers how to be leaders themselves.

Discussion

Determining impact of educational programs is difficult, especially with complex areas such as school leadership. However, despite these difficulties, the field of educational leadership, and education at large, must work toward developing methodologies for tracking the impact of such programs. While case studies have limitations as a method for measuring impact, they may be a beginning step in tracking and identifying which knowledge, skills and dispositions graduates infuse into their leadership activities.

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